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Land swaps may resolve Luke issue

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Our West Valley has a long and rich agrarian history. Long before Luke Air Force Base, the Sun Cities, or the Glendale and Cardinals stadiums, pioneer families settled along the banks of the Gila and Agua Fria rivers. It was a different and easier time.

Amidst the growth of the past decades, West Valley farmers - many the descendants of the original homesteaders - have adapted and endured. It's been a wonderful place to practice our trade and raise our families.

When the Army Air Corps established Luke Field between the World Wars, we all joined together to support its mission, their airmen and to be good neighbors. It's the same today. Our support for Luke AFB is a strong unifying element. But there's a difference: Arizona's burgeoning growth is at our barn doors and knocking on the gates of Luke.

Over the last decade, public officials have taken meaningful and needed steps to assure compatible land use around Luke. A High Noise and Accident Potential Zone was established adjacent to the base that encompasses many of our families' lands. Our congressional delegation landed a \$27 million appropriation to the purchase lands closest to the end of the runways. State lawmakers have passed laws this year that prohibit the underground storage of natural gas near the base; protect military training routes and auxiliary training fields; and impose further land use restrictions around military facilities.

These are great steps and they are the result of hard work and community collaboration. But there is more work to be done. The challenge of saving Luke will not be met until open space is preserved for the future and there has been reasonable compensation for the encroachment on our property rights. The problem is that the state and local governments do not have the resources to pay for the land it wants and that Luke needs.

The farmers in our coalition do not believe that the burden of supplying land to preserve Luke should be exclusively ours. For many years, it has been and we have peacefully co-existed. But growth has changed everything.

Quite simply, the growth that encroaches on Luke encroaches on farming as well. We cannot move equipment across busy roads. We create smells and noise that are not compatible with adjacent residential development. Farms are not particularly good urban neighbors.

So, farms and farmers are being forced out. For those of us with property near or adjacent to the base, governmental actions at Luke and to preserve Luke negatively impact the value of our property.

Our group has sought to pursue public policy that is reasonable and fair. And what we've learned is that government doesn't have the bank account to satisfy its appetite when it comes to Luke.

There remains another key element on the table - a possible land trade. The seed was planted last fall, but for it to happen it will take the cooperative efforts federal, state and local leaders.

A trade does not cost the government money. Lands managed by the federal Bureau of Land Management would be exchanged for private land around Luke, and the farmers in limbo would be reasonably compensated. Luke then would have a permanent buffer zone and its mission would be preserved. Appraisals would be required. Ultimate approval must come from Congress.

This concept is not untested or unprecedented. Land trades in Las Vegas helped Nevada leaders face similar challenges to Nellis Air Force Base.

Our leaders have a good crop in the ground with what they have accomplished to date. A properly constructed land trade will fertilize this crop for a successful harvest of keeping this important military facility and economic engine viable.

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